

# A Century of Curtain Calls

## Theatre department's history sustains defeats, triumphs

Story by  
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In her ensemble of brothers and sisters, H. Alice Howell was known as "the fun one." The youngest daughter of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Nebraska family in Omaha, Alice quickly took to her role as the entertainer, the baby of the family, playing charades in her world of make-believe.

Little did the Howell family realize that amid the applause and amusement for these nursery rhyme productions were the roots of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's fine and performing arts program that would endure through the next century.

Like a theatrical masterpiece, the history of the UNL theatre arts department has withstood its share of triumphs and defeats, its comedies and tragedies, its masters and eccentrics.

But for 100 years, the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and R streets has remained a fixture in Lincoln. After all, the show must go on.

In 1900, however, Lincoln lacked the theatrical process it boasts today. But Howell would eventually change that.

The most detailed recollection of Howell's earliest years at UNL can be found in Lincoln graduate student Alan Nielsen's 168-page thesis "Greetings from the Queen: The Life and Work of H. Alice Howell," which tells the story of the 26-year-old elocution teacher who transformed the spoken word at UNL.

While dreams of becoming an actress were temporarily extinguished by her disapproving mother, Howell used her new job as a springboard for pushing drama to the forefront of campus.

During her first semester, Howell organized a Dramatics Club, which performed a series of tagtag plays plagued by sudden changes-of-bills and last-minute postponements and cancellations, Nielsen wrote.

Using her position to partially fulfill her dream of the spotlight, Howell directed and acted in productions.

She made her directorial debut with the 1902 senior class commencement show "As You Like It," considered a success despite a student prank involving the kidnapping of one actor, who was held overnight and released just in time to go on stage.

Luck continued to smile upon Howell's pursuit of respectable theater with a monumental yet controversial gift in 1904. Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller Jr. donated two-thirds of the cost for a new theater, \$66,666.67.

Nielsen wrote that local protests condemned "tainted oil money," donated by Rockefeller, accusing the multimillionaire of trying to dominate the university.

Soon, a compromise was made, said Julie Hagemeyer, the department's general manager.

The University of Nebraska Board of Regents officially approved the controversial donation as long as the Temple Building - an elaborate, three-story building adorned with eight Bedford stone columns, was constructed outside the campus limits, said Jeff Howell, department chairman.

"Supposedly the columns were rolled throughout the streets of Lincoln because the architect didn't want to cut them," he said.

The grand building, completed in 1908, featured spiral stairways and fireplaces throughout the antique oak interior.

The 700-seat theater opened with George Bernard Shaw's play "You Never Can Tell" on Jan. 18, 1908, to enthusiastic audiences and rave reviews.

Theater finally had taken its place on the university stage.

Thanks to her determination and dedication, Howell is credited with establishing the first state university drama department in 1913 by creating a four-year program in Elocution and Dramatic Art and eventually organizing the School of Drama in 1915.

But the founder of UNL theater temporarily left to pursue another goal: to serve as a canteen worker in France during World War I, where she befriended a young driver by the name of Walt Disney.

Even after the war, Hagemeyer said, Howell and Disney remained close friends. In fact, a signed photograph of the famed cartoonist still hangs in the Temple building.

In 1932, the Studio Theatre opened on the second floor as Howell invited guest artists from the coasts to the Temple Theatre - later renamed the Howell Theatre - to teach, act and direct the University Players.

But as high as UNL's theater program soared during the Roaring '20s, the 1930s mostly introduced a low point for Howell and her University Players, the student theater group.

Live theater struggled through low ticket sales and stiff competition from vaudeville and motion pictures, along with the added burden of the Great Depression.

Howell suffered a painful blow in 1933 as the Board of Regents closed the School of Fine Arts, transferring dramatics to the College of Arts and Sciences.

Despite these hard times, Howell defended dramatics with gusto and fervor, Hagemeyer said.

Although Howell resigned in 1939, her spotlight yearnings have had a greater impact than she could have imagined.

Alice Abel, whose parents, George and Hazel Abel, studied under Howell, said her parents revered their teacher so much, they named Abel after Howell, a "true lady."

"Mother once said that (Howell) was wedded to her profession and that we, the members and students of the speech and theatre department, were her children," Abel said. "She loved her pupils more than anything."

If H. Alice Howell was the birth mother of the UNL theatre department, then Dallas Williams was its founding father.

After Howell died in 1944, the baton was passed to Williams, who spent the next three decades strengthening and improving the shaky department.

Infamous for outrageous tantrums, the new department chairman ruled university theater with an iron fist and tough love.

Patricia Overton, general manager of the theatre department from 1970 to 1995, called Williams a "cosmopolitan guy."

"He inherited a dismal situation when he arrived," Overton said. "We were in bad state financially and structurally. There was no one really in charge after Alice left."

"The theatre department didn't die, but we just didn't go anywhere."

Not if Williams could help it.

Overton said Williams, along with professors Bill Morgan and Steve Cole, combined their energy, time and money to revive the flailing department.

Thanks to a mysterious phone call to the fire marshal, which revealed some hazardous conditions, supposedly made by Williams, the first major renovations in the Temple began in 1949, which ignited 20 years of theatrical vitality.

"They were energetic, and they pitched right in to help," Overton said of the professors. "We had an invincible student participation, too."

RIGHT: Alice Howell, founder of the UNL theatre department, performs in her role as Joan of Arc in 1916. Howell considered St. Joan her patron saint, said Julie Hagemeyer, general manager, because both were "women working in a man's world."

LEFT: Dallas Williams, theatre department chairman from 1944 to 1971, was infamous for his staged tantrums, which included throwing chairs and smashing watches to get students' attention.

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